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# STARLOG

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**APRIL 1991**  
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# Director of Men-Apes

Throughout his career,  
Don Taylor played  
to both sides  
of the camera.

By TOM WEAVER

**T**hey're a dime a dozen today, but up until the 1950s, with the obvious exception of major names like Charles Chaplin, Laurence Olivier and Orson Welles, the actor/director was a genuine rarity in Hollywood. In the 1950s, however, the floodgates opened, and in the forefront was a light leading man who remembers only too well the stumbling blocks once placed in the path of would-be directors.

"It took me quite a while, because in those days, nobody would let *anybody* new direct," Don Taylor recalls. "Today all you have to do is say, 'I wanna direct,' and the next thing you know, you got a movie. Back in the '50s, it was a hell of a lot tougher. Dick Powell, then one of the regulars on a TV anthology series called *Four Star Playhouse*, gave me the chance to start directing. I was a trailblazer. Paul Henreid, Ida Lupino, Dick Powell—we were the forerunners of actors becoming directors. But it was very difficult, very. We really had to prove ourselves."

Of course, the days when Don Taylor had to prove himself as a director are long gone, with his list of features up in the double-digits and the roster of TV directing jobs in the hundreds. Few directors that prolific have avoided dabbling in the science fiction and fantasy genres, and Taylor has helmed such well-remembered SF titles as *Escape from the Planet of the Apes*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and *The Final Countdown*, not to mention the supernatural shocker *Damien—Omen II* and numerous episodes of TV's *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.

Born in Freeport, Pennsylvania, Taylor studied law, then speech and drama at Penn State University, where as a freshman, he began taking part in college stage productions ("There was never any question about it once I put my foot on a stage. I knew I was going to be an actor"). Hitchhiking to Hollywood in 1942, Taylor screen-tested



In 1971, Don Taylor directed Kim Hunter, Ricardo Montalban and Roddy McDowall in the popular *Escape from Planet of the Apes*.

at Warner Bros., but was rejected because of his draft status. MGM, not quite as fussy, signed him to a contract and immediately cast him as a soldier in *The Human Comedy* (1943).

More minor roles followed before Taylor enlisted in the Army, but even while serving there, he continued acting. Playwright/screenwriter Moss Hart chose him to play one of the leading roles in the Army Air Force production of his play *Winged Victory*, which opened in November 1943. Taylor repeated his stage role in 20th Century Fox's film version of the play in 1944.

## Love Slave

Returning to civilian life, Taylor resumed his work in pictures with a top role in the trendsetting crime drama *The Naked City* (1948), which still stacks up as his favorite among his own films. "*Naked City* was a classic, one of the first of its kind. Now it's very ordinary to go and shoot anywhere [on actual locations], but on *Naked City*, we did it long before anybody else."

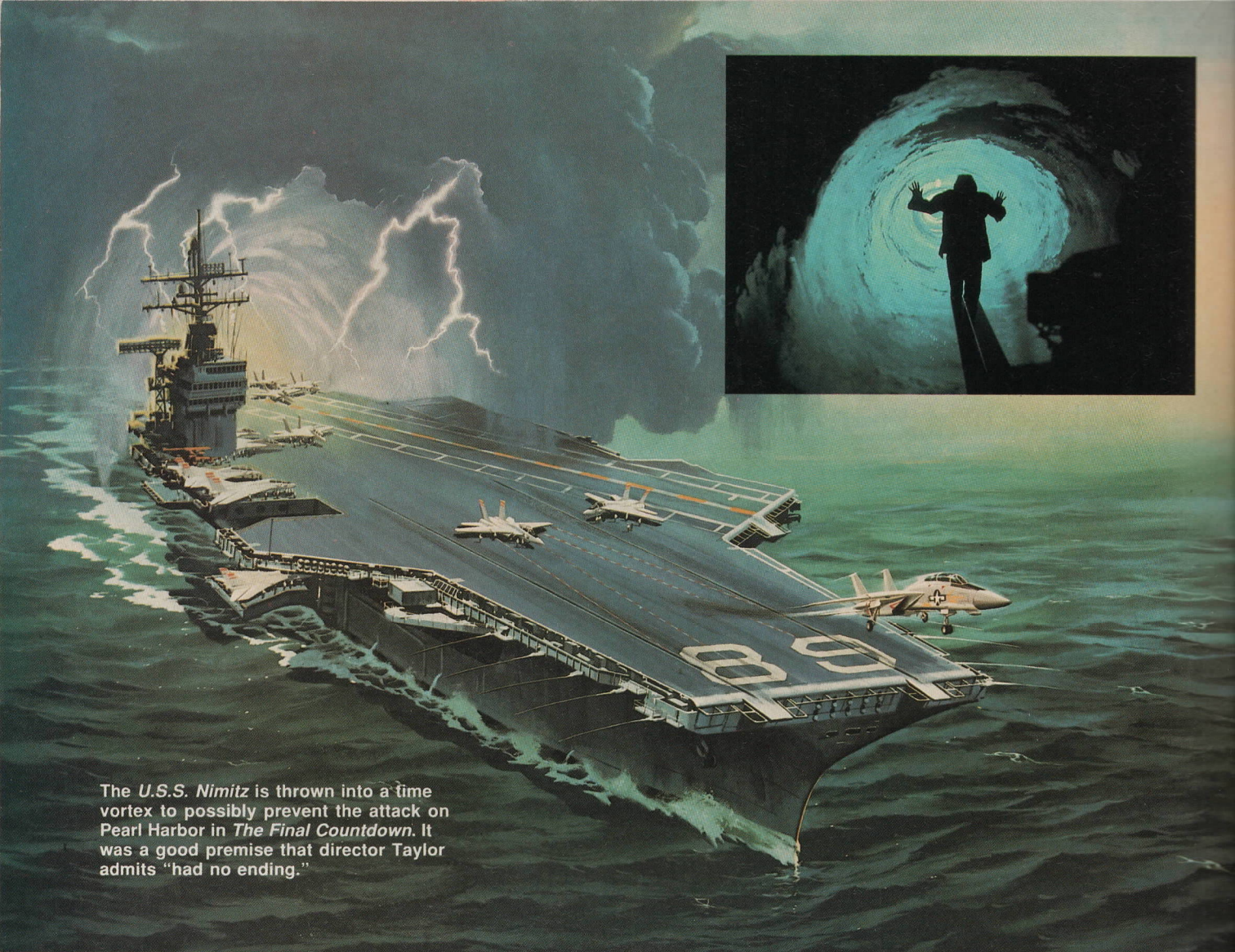
The role for which he's best-remembered remains the MGM comedy *Father of the Bride* (1950), as fiance to Elizabeth Taylor ("That's still going strong—and so's Liz!"). He reprised the character in 1951's *Father's Little Dividend* as well as playing other leading parts in '50s films at RKO (*Flying Leathernecks*, *The Blue Veil*), Fox (*Japanese War Bride*, *Destination Gobi*) and Paramount (*Stalag 17*, as the missing prisoner around whom the plot pivots).

Most actors have at least one skeleton in their closet of film credits, and Taylor has a dilly. "I was getting a divorce at the time, so I called my agent and I said, 'Listen, I've had it. I want to get out of the country. Do you have anything?' He said, 'Yeah, we've got a picture in Brazil—I said, 'That's for me.' Turned out to be *Women of Green Hell*. I didn't even read it; when I got to Brazil, they gave me the

*TOM WEAVER, veteran STARLOG correspondent, is the co-author of Universal Horrors (McFarland, \$45). Weaver profiled John Agar in STARLOG #164.*

All Escape Photos: Copyright 1971 20th Century Fox





The U.S.S. Nimitz is thrown into a time vortex to possibly prevent the attack on Pearl Harbor in *The Final Countdown*. It was a good premise that director Taylor admits "had no ending."

script. And when I read it," he grins, "I was ready to cut my throat!"

Shot under the title *Women of Green Hell*, but released by Universal as *Love Slaves of the Amazons*, the notorious fantasy-adventure (written, produced and directed by Curt Siodmak, STARLOG #150) top-billed Taylor as an adventurer captured by a tribe of green-skinned warrior women in the unexplored jungles of South America. "Curt Siodmak—the brother of Robert Siodmak—had written a famous novel called *Donovan's Brain*, and he wrote a bunch of films. But this one—oh, God! Terrible! He was a good writer, but he didn't know how to direct. But there was a dear old actor down there, Eduardo Ciannelli, and he and I just had a great time together. We said, 'What the hell, let's do it,' we kidded each other and we got through it. I got along with Siodmak—almost—but Ciannelli was very rude to him. And yet, I was having a ball because I was 'out of commission.' Really, that's all I was doing, hiding out."

He ended up hiding out longer than expected. "That damn movie *never* ended! Shooting went on and on and on. For a cheap movie, it was amazing; I was down there in Sao Paulo for a long time. I swam

in waters that I don't think I would want to go in anymore. I remember a guy saying, 'Watch out for the piranhas,' just as I was diving in."

In the film's one good scene, the heroes' boat, mired in mud, is boarded by a gang of cutthroats and a lively brawl ensues. "That scene, I think, was almost an ad lib," Taylor recalls. "We had been out all day and we were coming home, and the unit manager (an American out of Universal, there to protect the money) said, 'Shoot something.' Siodmak said, 'What do I shoot?' and the unit manager said [sharply], 'Put the camera *there* and turn it on!' Then, he yelled at some guys, 'Hey, *you* guys start chasing *these* guys.' That's why that was probably the best scene: Siodmak didn't direct it!"

"I believe Universal did *Love Slaves* because they had 'frozen funds' in Brazil, just sitting there, and so when somebody said, 'I can make a film in Brazil,' they said right away, 'Sure! Go ahead!' I told myself that nobody would ever see it, a movie like that would never make it. Then, television bought it, and that son-of-a-gun's on all the time! God, I have people call me at 4:00 a.m., laughing so hard they can barely get the words out. They say, 'Guess

what! *Love Slaves of the Amazons* is on!' "

The *Love Slaves* experience had a happy ending when Taylor was asked by the Johnson Office to travel through South America on a good will tour upon the film's completion. "I flew to almost every country, and there was a mob waiting for me every time. I really felt like I was back to being a star. I had a good time."

## True Loves

His acting career in a slump via pictures like *Love Slaves* and Hammer's *The Men of Sherwood Forest*, Taylor's desire to switch career gears and direct continued to grow. "It's a director's medium," he asserts. "I had been in 20, 25 films and starred or co-starred in most of them. But the creative forces that I wasn't feeling as an actor were all in the director's path. That's really why I did it. I had spent a lot of time watching directors, and I knew much more about directing than I thought I did." With Dick Powell's help, Taylor made his directorial debut with a *Four Star Playhouse* episode and soon branched off into other shows such as *Telephone Time* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.

"I had known Mr. Hitchcock because I had been up for a couple of his films. *Rope*

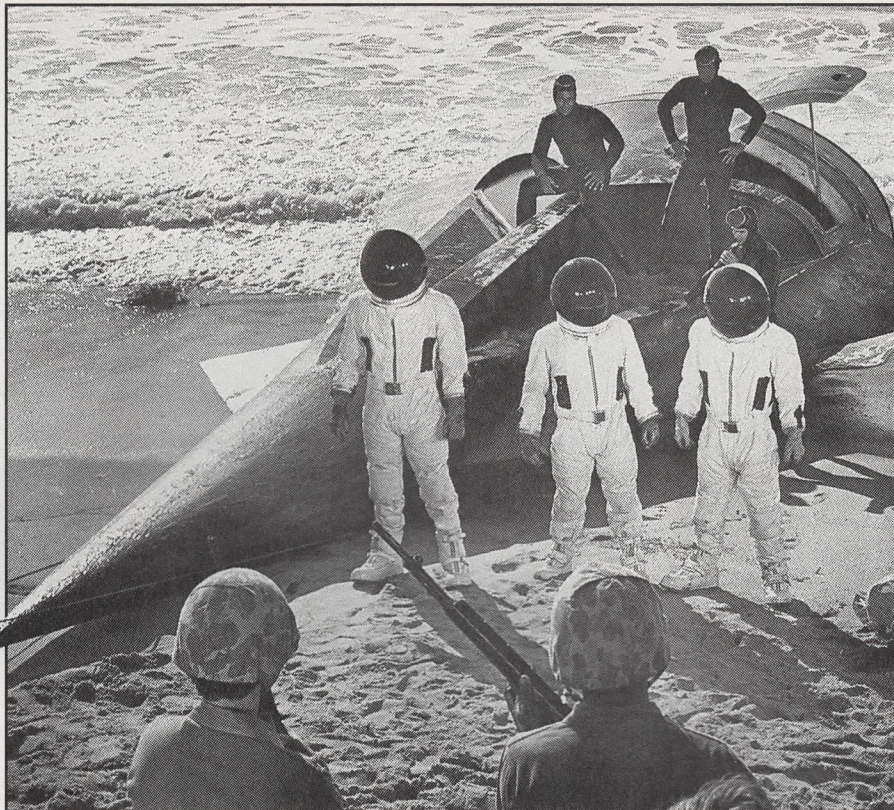


[1948] was one of them; I had just finished *Naked City* and I went to see Hitchcock about *Rope*. We just talked. He had just seen *Naked City* and he wanted to know how they made this shot, that shot and the other shot. He marveled at the fact that we shot on Fifth Avenue in New York.

"Anyway, I didn't get *Rope*, but I had been interviewed by him. And once I got to do that first *Hitchcock* episode, then I used to sit and watch *him* direct. He was taking all the good scripts. My first year, he, Arthur Hiller and myself were among those directing. Arthur and I were way down at the bottom. If Hitch didn't want to do it or couldn't do it, then Robert Stevens got it, and if he had already had one, *then* it came down to Arthur or me. Once in a while, we'd get a good one; many times, we were struggling. But basically, those were good scripts. When I think of the stuff that goes by me today, those were *excellent* scripts. The only thing that was wrong with them was what was wrong with most of the shows at that time: There was absolutely no production. They would put up two walls and put a picture on the wall, a chair and a table and say, 'Shoot.' No books, no magazines, no papers, no frills. You couldn't get any production worth a damn."

The CBS show yielded another dividend for Taylor, one far more important than the directing jobs and the experience of working with Hitchcock: Directing the 1958 episode "The Crocodile Case" brought him in contact with actress Hazel Court, reigning scream queen of British horror films. Romance eventually blossomed; Taylor and Court tied the knot in 1964 and the marriage endures to this day.

After several years of directing in TV (such series as *Have Gun Will Travel*), Taylor made his behind-the-scenes feature bow with the fantasy-comedy *Everything's Ducky* (1961), starring Mickey Rooney and Buddy Hackett as sailors who team up



"I liked my script for *Escape* as much as I liked the first *Apes* script; in fact," notes Taylor, "mine was more humane."

for a series of adventures with a talking duck. The film could hardly have been more minor, but Taylor was still happy to get the assignment. "It was a big step at that point. I was directing a TV series called *Hong Kong* with Rod Taylor when Mickey Rooney called me and said, 'Would you please direct this?' I had directed him four or five times in television at that point. I was hesitant, but Hazel said, 'Oh, go ahead and do it,' so I did. I got Arthur Hiller to direct the *Hong Kongs*, so I could get released.

"*Everything's Ducky* was too tough. We had to do it in 11 days. Mickey and Buddy

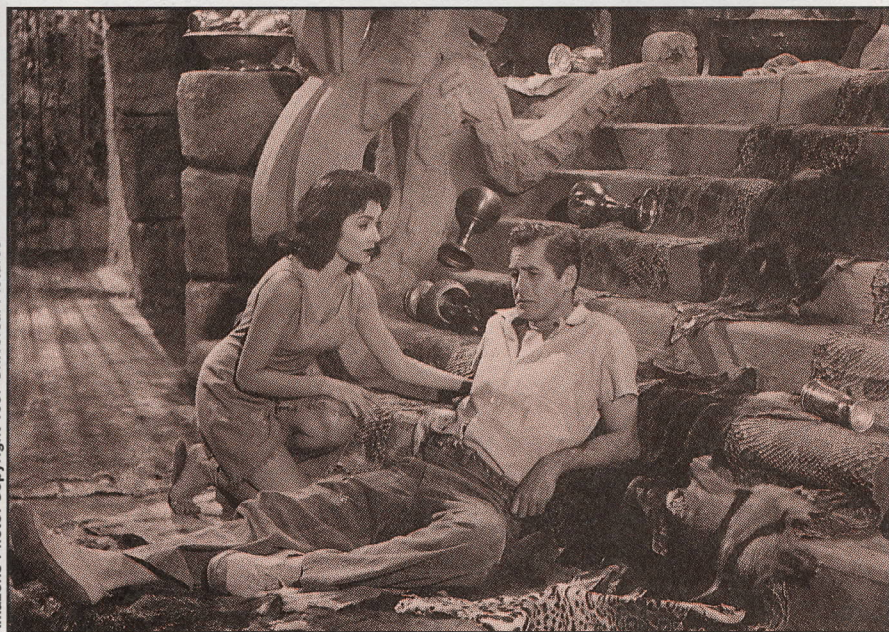
were good in it, but they were clowning and I had a terrible time. I couldn't stop 'em from clowning, and yet I didn't have the time for it. Mickey was the producer—it was his company making the film—so what could I do? And the duck didn't work. They finally tied his beak with a rubber band and made him eat cigarettes, that's the only way we could get him to open and close his mouth as though he was speaking. Talk about cruelty to animals!"

More to Taylor's liking were his two episodes of Rod Serling's *Night Gallery*, "They're Tearing Down Tim Riley's Bar" with William Windom (Taylor was Emmy-nominated for his direction) and "The Messiah of Mott Street" with screen great Edward G. Robinson. " 'Messiah of Mott Street' was tough. I couldn't get Eddie Robinson to be Jewish. And he *was* Jewish! As a matter of fact, he was my technical advisor, because he was a Levitical student at one point; he helped me a tremendous amount. But he had spent years being an Italian gangster, and now he wouldn't give me the Yiddish flavor. He was very sweet, but he wouldn't bend."

## Animal Lover

Taylor's other '60s films as director were *Ride the Wild Surf* (1964), a *Beach Party*-inspired surfing romp with Fabian and Tab Hunter and the U.S./German *Jack of Diamonds* (1967) with George Hamilton. He directed one of his best (and

**During his acting career, Taylor traveled to Brazil. He was captured by green-skinned warrior women and became one of the *Love Slaves of the Amazons*.**







When Taylor inherited *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, the creatures surrounding Barbara Carrera resembled something out of a Disney film.



Director Don Taylor



"There was too much gore," notes Taylor of his *Omen II*. "Every time you changed a reel, there was another character that you knew was gonna get it."



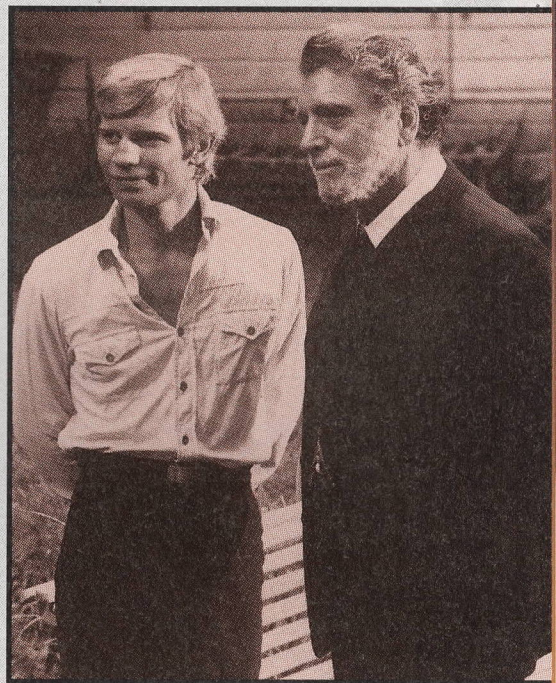


most popular) films in 1971 when he signed on to direct the second sequel to Fox's profitable *Planet of the Apes*.

"*Escape from the Planet of the Apes* was just glass all the way, smooth as silk," Taylor reminisces. "Good script (no, a *beautiful* script), the actors were divine, everything went right. It was one of those instances where I just couldn't wait to get to the studio every day. There should be more pictures like that, but you don't get 'em anymore. In those days, all the people hadn't gotten in the act. Today, you do a picture like that and you have 20 people wanting to get their hands in, wanting to be creative, wanting to have a say. In the old days, it was easy: There would be a producer and maybe one other person. You can handle two or three or four people, but you can't handle 15, 20."

Taylor hadn't seen either of the first two *Apes* films when he was approached to direct *Escape*. "When they suggested I do *Escape*, [producer] Arthur Jacobs, who I knew for years, ran *Planet of the Apes* for me at his house. I thought it was marvelous. Eventually, I saw the second one, *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*; Ted Post directed that. It was a real bastardized version of the first one and it didn't really work, didn't have a story. But *Escape* was one of the best scripts; Paul Dehn was a good writer. I liked my script for *Escape* as much as I liked the first *Apes* script; in fact, mine was more humane."

Aside from the strong story, Taylor's job was facilitated by cooperative stars who knew their characters inside and out. "They were so professional, Kim Hunter [STARLOG #160] and Roddy McDowall, and they knew their characters. I never *told* them what to do, I always *asked*. Sometimes Roddy would say, 'No, I don't think our characters would *do*' whatever it was, and how could I disagree? This was their second, third time out! Makeup-wise, though, they had a terrible time."



Taylor believes his strength in directing comes from giving his actors security as he did for Michael York and Burt Lancaster on *The Island of Dr. Moreau*.

*Escape* had its share of lighter moments—more so than any other movie in the five-film series—but it also posed some interesting philosophical questions. "That's right, the profundity suddenly came through at one point. It was a plot where Somebody Had To Be Dumb, and in this case, it was the human beings. In this film, it worked. But that gets boring after a while; in almost every TV show today, Somebody Has To Be Dumb, say something or do something that's so stupid, because that's the only way the show can progress. It's true of many movies, too."

Extensive makeup played an even larger role in Taylor's next SF film. "I had just done *Great Scout and Cathouse Thursday* [1976] for American International, and they wanted me to do *The Island of Dr. Moreau* for them. But I inherited something that I couldn't do anything about, and that was the appliances that had been made—chin, nose and forehead for all these man-animals. The idea was that these animal men should have been grotesque—half human and half beast. But they weren't. They were all Disney, cuddly. You wanted to kiss 'em!"



he laughs. "I couldn't make any grotesquery out of 'em at all. We had about eight makeup men, with John Chambers and Dan Striepeke in charge; they created all the stuff for the *Planet of the Apes* films. And again, you couldn't reuse the appliances; by the time they came off, that was it, you just threw 'em away."

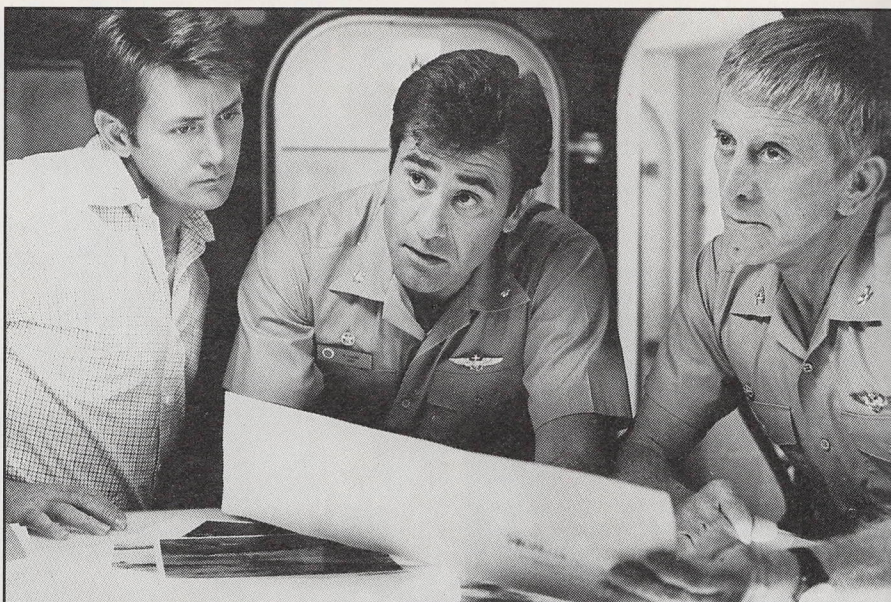
AIP's *Dr. Moreau* got an added box office boost from the casting of Burt Lancaster as Moreau, even though Lancaster wasn't the first choice for the role. "We were going for an English actor. The fact that it was based on an H. G. Wells story, we thought an Englishman should play the part. [Richard] Burton and [Peter] O'Toole and people like that were considered; we never got turn-downs from any of them, they just weren't available. Burt was available. Back in the days when I made *Naked City* and he made *The Killers* [1946] for Mark Hellinger, Burt and I were very close, but even so, when he was brought up in connection with *Dr. Moreau*, I said, 'Jeez, I don't think this is a part for Burt.' Somebody turned to me and said, 'You wanna make the picture?' and I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Well, don't turn down *everybody*.'



"They were so professional, Kim Hunter and Roddy McDowall, and they knew their characters," says Taylor of his *Escape* stars.

"Right around that point, Burt showed up in Cannes, and he tore the place apart just walking down the street—the people went ape, because he's an old star, and I guess they don't get many old stars there anymore. That convinced us that we should use Burt. But even *he* had some hesitation, so I went and I talked to him. He said, 'You got a problem with the script.' I said, 'Yeah, but what picture have you done lately that didn't?' We *did* have a problem with the script, and we did a serious rewrite on it that...didn't work, unfortunately. But Burt was very good, because he was secure with me; I took care of him, watched him. That's my whole theory of directing: security. Give the actor security and, to a great degree, let him go. Sometimes you're able to do that completely, like I did with Burt, and sometimes you're not—that's when you get into trouble. Burt worked very hard."

Hero Michael York, Taylor opines,



On a location that cost a quarter million dollars, Martin Sheen, James Farentino and Kirk Douglas go over their options for *The Final Countdown*.

also did a good job in the film, but, "he was out there on a wing and a prayer. And when it came time for him to start wearing the [man-animal] makeup, was he scared! 'What are you *doing* to me? Christ, I'm a leading man! I don't wanna be a bear.' We had to hold his hand!" And Barbara Carrera "was about 14 feet off the ground in those days. She was swingin' somewhere that I wasn't. But she's so gorgeous; she was perfect casting for it."

Shot in the Virgin Islands and costing far more than the average AIP exploitation item, *Island of Dr. Moreau* "was a big picture for Sam Arkoff, and it didn't do that well. AIP movies generally ran in drive-in theaters, and I remember when the rushes on *Dr. Moreau* got to Sam, he started sending cables saying, 'More light! More light! It's too dark!' He was afraid they couldn't run it at the drive-ins!"

Taylor is nothing if not consistent on the subject of *Dr. Moreau*: He doesn't think the Wells story was much good ("Wells wrote it, I think, on a weekend"), nor the 1933 Paramount version *Island of Lost Souls* ("It's terrible! But critic after critic saw ours and said it wasn't as good"), nor his own AIP effort. "But I've seen it now a couple times on TV, and it looks better now than it did when I made it. I don't know how to explain *that* one, but it's true! For what it was, it worked. But there wasn't enough horror in it."

## Lost Loves

There was no shortage of horror in *Damien—Omen II*, 20th Century Fox's sensationalistic follow-up to their 1976 box office winner *The Omen*. *Damien*, no worse for wear after the bloodbath of *Omen*, was back, this time in the charge of William Holden and Lee Grant, and all hell was breaking loose again in a picture that seemed determined to out-gruesome its predecessor. "That's one thing that I think was wrong with the script, the idea that More is Better," Taylor remarks. "There

was too much gore. Every time you changed a reel, there was another character that you knew was gonna get it. I inherited all that. I would have eliminated at least two of those killings. All the stuff that I did (the man being killed by the train, the doctor cut in half in the elevator, and so on) was good, I just thought it was too much. Then, it got really gruesome at the end. Suddenly, Bill is stabbed to death, and Lee Grant gets burned up—Jesus! More is *not* better."

Replacing British director Michael Hodges, who had worked on the film for about 10 days ("He and the producer just weren't seeing eye to eye as to what was being done, and he was fired"), Taylor shot the film in Chicago and on locations in Wisconsin, with many interiors also shot on the Fox lot. "I had to redo quite a bit. I would say out of the work Hodges did, I augmented or reshot about a week."

Holden had been offered the lead in the first *Omen*, but turned it down because he wouldn't do a horror film. This all changed, of course, two years and an offer of \$750,000 later. "Getting Bill for *Omen II* was a plus value; we had made two movies together and we were old friends." All Holden did after *Omen II* came out was complain about it ("sick-sick excesses...unhealthy ambience"), leaving Taylor a bit mystified. "He thought it was pretty good when we did it. I ran it for him about three times, so I don't know why he complained."

Taylor's next film, a *Twilight Zone*-ish type of science fiction story, *The Final Countdown*, was set aboard an ultra-modern aircraft carrier which passes through a time warp, winding up in the Pacific on the eve of the December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor sneak attack. Should Captain Kirk Douglas and the men of the *U.S.S. Nimitz* prevent the Day of Infamy and change history? "When my agent sent me the script and I read it, my first thought was that it was go-

(continued on page 72)



# Taylor

(continued from page 64)

ing to be difficult. And it *was* tough—it was a big picture. It was a good picture, except we had no ending—it just went nowhere, the air came out of the balloon. Everything was interesting getting into it; I thought it was just dreary getting out of it. It just had nowhere to go. About halfway through, you knew that Pearl Harbor was such a historical entity, that it *had* to happen.” *Escape from the Planet of the Apes* posed the same type of hypothetical SF question, but Taylor is quick to point out that “the thing about *Escape* is that both Roddy McDowall and Kim Hunter are killed. At least, there’s an ending. The ending in *Final Countdown* had nothing to do with the whole picture, of being in a time warp. Suddenly, they’re just back in their own time, sailing blithely along!”

Shot aboard the world’s largest nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the *U.S.S. Nimitz*—a privilege the filmmakers paid a quarter of a million dollars for—*Final Countdown* bears a producer credit for Peter Vincent Douglas, “but it turned out to be [his father] Kirk. Kirk was great for about two-thirds of it, and then, Peter was getting in trouble, and so, Kirk exercised his muscles. Of which he has quite a few. He made noises. Kirk was very difficult. As an actor, he’s superb; as a producer, he’s a pain in the ass. (That’s meant nicely.) He’s a good actor, easy to direct, no problems.”

In 1987, Taylor directed the made-in-Toronto TV movie *Ghost of a Chance* with Redd Foxx and Dick Van Dyke, a *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*-type fantasy that was meant to spark a series. Taylor admits that it was a film that probably shouldn’t even have been made, at least not under the circumstances. “We didn’t have a [workable] script, and it was the start of a writers’ strike. We should never have started. We were rewriting the whole time.”

Taylor isn’t as busy with directing as he once was, often turning down TV directing offers and devoting more time to writing. Right now, his wish is to return to his first love, the stage. “I know I’ll direct a couple more pictures—as a matter of fact, I’m contemplating doing one right now—but I feel like acting again and I would like to do a play. But I haven’t found a play that I particularly want to do.” For a writer/director like Taylor, the solution is simple: “I think I’m gonna write myself a part!”

And he’s equally happy with his acting and directing careers. “I love seeing some of those movies that I was in, but I would have died not directing. I broke into it when it wasn’t easy. When I decided I wanted to direct, I couldn’t even get to first base; to get a half-hour show, I practically had to kiss Dick Powell in the middle of Santa Monica Boulevard! But at least I helped to break that barrier down, in a way. It *is* a director’s medium.”

